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Abbink, G.J.

**published in**  
African Affairs  
2011

**DOI (link to publisher)**  
[10.1093/afraf/adr002](https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adr002)

**document version**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Abbink, G. J. (2011). Religion in public spaces: emerging Muslim–Christian polemics in Ethiopia. *African Affairs*, 110(439), 253-274. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adr002>

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## RELIGION IN PUBLIC SPACES: EMERGING MUSLIM–CHRISTIAN POLEMICS IN ETHIOPIA

JON ABBINK\*

### ABSTRACT

In Ethiopia, as in other parts of Africa, relations between Christians and Muslims show a new dynamic under the impact of both state policies and global connections. Religious identities are becoming more dominant as people's primary public identity, and more ideological. This development has ramifications for the 'public sphere', where identities of a religious nature are currently presented and contested in a self-consciously polemical fashion. This shared space of national political and civic identity may become more 'fragmented' and thus lend itself to conflict and ideological battle. This article examines recent developments in the polemics of religion in Ethiopia, and the possible role of the state as custodian (or not) of an overarching civic order beyond religion, as well as the emerging rivalries between communities of faith. A crucial question is what social effects these polemics will have on communal relations and patterns of religious coexistence. Polemics between believers have a long history in Ethiopia, but a new and potentially problematic dynamic has emerged which may challenge mainstream believers, their inter-group social relations, and Ethiopian state policy. Polemics in Ethiopia express hegemonic strategies and claims to power, and are rapidly evolving as an ideological phenomenon expanding in public space. The secular state may need to reassert itself more emphatically so as to contain its own erosion in the face of assertive religious challenges.

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RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES HAVE RETURNED as vigorous constituent elements in communal and political discourse in Africa, including in the Horn of Africa.<sup>1</sup> The era of 'socialist' insurgencies and state-building projects, from the 1970s until the early 1990s, ended in more or less failed projects of national development in Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, and

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This article is dedicated to the memory of my late friend and colleague Berhanu Gebeyehu, who passed away suddenly on 19 July 2010. He made several insightful comments on previous versions.

1. Compare a recent survey: 'Pew Forum on religion and public life, tolerance and tension: Islam and Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa' (Pew Forum, Washington, DC, 2010).

Ethiopia. A gradual process of people reverting to religion as a frame of reference and often as a direct ideology for political action has become quite evident since. Ethiopia is formally a secular state with constitutionally enshrined freedom of worship, but religion is very present in the public sphere and functions as a key framework for community life. In a way religion also offers an alternative civic identity in a society where politics tends to be monopolized and state repression has rendered it a risky domain of activity.

I address the issue of the growing relevance of religion in Ethiopia's public sphere via the case of emerging religious polemics between Christians and Muslims. Religious polemics in Africa are evident in many other countries – among them Nigeria, Mali, Kenya, and Tanzania<sup>2</sup> – but are not well studied. The often imposing, intimidating verbal strategies used impart social, political and scientific relevance to polemical exchanges.<sup>3</sup> My argument is that, in the past decade or so, religious polemics in Ethiopia have expressed discursive battles about religious 'truths', communal identities, and power claims that take on a 'primordialist' character and sharpen boundaries between faith communities and thereby between citizens. Such polemics tend to establish antagonistic and hegemonic religious discourses in Ethiopia's public space, marked increasingly by declining democratic-political debate. In doing so, polemics not only fuel tensions but challenge the political domain – that is, the secular state order itself.

Paradoxically, the initially more liberal political atmosphere in Ethiopia since the 1991 regime change facilitated the public expression of religion. It also allowed local Christian and Muslim organizations to reconnect to global trends – and organizations or preachers (both Muslim and Evangelical) aimed to reform local religion and expand the faith globally. This 'global reconnect' – meaning relations with powerful religious institutions and funding sources overseas and emphasizing more 'fundamentalist' forms of religion – has led to more doctrinaire positions and to symbolic power struggles in the public sphere in Ethiopia. Local religious elites and newly emerging and foreign-supported groups<sup>4</sup> (notably

2. For a recent study, see J. Chesworth, 'Fundamentalism and outreach strategies in East Africa: Christian evangelism and Muslim da'wa', in B. F. Soares (ed.), *Muslim-Christian Encounters in Africa* (Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2006), pp. 159–86.

3. The word 'polemics' goes back, of course, to the Greek term *polemikos*, meaning 'warlike'.

4. Even the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council noted with concern the 'increasing external Wahhabi influence within the Muslim community. The EIASC alleged that money flowed into the country through Saudi-funded entities and NGOs, raising concern over external non-Ethiopian Islamic influences.' Cited in US Government, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 'Ethiopia', in the 'International Religious Freedom Report 2008', <[www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108368.htm](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108368.htm)> (2 January 2009). See similar complaints in the 2010 report: <[www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148688.htm](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148688.htm)>.

‘reformist’-Muslim and Evangelical) see ways to enhance their influence, aiming at expansion and hegemony.<sup>5</sup> A first analysis of the new religious polemics shows that ideas of mutual toleration and cooperation are changing, if not declining. This tendency may also generate political problems in Ethiopia, all the more so because polemics have a mass appeal due to intensive utilization of new media technologies and funding from global partners and financiers.

In Ethiopia, the side-effects of this emerging religious rivalry are not only debates about what kind of national identity the country should or should not have, but also more competition over public space, often in the most literal sense: when and where to build mosques, churches, or chapels; self-presentation in the media; public celebrations; and religious ‘noise’ production by means of loudspeakers.

Historically, Ethiopian society is marked by diversity and inter-religious co-existence, but has always had some measure of religious polemics, occasionally drawing in the power holders (emperors, nobles). A theoretical interpretation of today’s polemics shows that they express hegemonic strategies and claims to power, and are rapidly evolving as an ideological phenomenon, moving relatively autonomously from material and socio-economic factors.

### *The post-1991 situation*

In May 1991 the insurgent movement EPRDF<sup>6</sup> took over government in Ethiopia and created new space for political, economic, and religious action, including party formation, elections, an independent press, and religious self-organization. Most of that space – especially in the political, civic, and media domains – is closed again, especially since the highly controversial elections of 2005 and 2010 when a forceful re-establishing of EPRDF dominant-party rule occurred.<sup>7</sup> Religious life was relatively undisturbed, but seems to have taken on a dynamic of its own.<sup>8</sup> The post-1991 resurgence of religious discourse took

5. As a result, the contours of Ethiopian everyday urban life are gradually reshaped. The advance of the Muslim and Christian reformists seems to have a clearly conservative if not reactionary impact on people’s behaviour.

6. Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, still in power and led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who is also leader of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), the core party of the EPRDF.

7. Jon Abbink, ‘Discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 election crisis in Ethiopia and its aftermath’, *African Affairs* 105, 419 (2006), pp. 173–99; and Kjetil Tronvoll, ‘Briefing: the Ethiopian 2010 federal and regional elections: re-establishing the one-party state’, *African Affairs* 110, 438 (2011), pp. 1–16.

8. See the IRIN news message of 2003: ‘Ethiopia: religion “new breeding ground for conflict”’, at <[www.irinnews.org/PrintReport.aspx?ReportId=43642](http://www.irinnews.org/PrintReport.aspx?ReportId=43642)> (1 December 2007).

many forms, from moderate and accommodative to radical and militant. Many of my informants<sup>9</sup> saw this as a new 'democratic' right, in the sense of 'do as you want' and 'further your own cause as much as you can'. Most relevant are the renewed expansion of Islam in its various forms (Salafism, Tabligh)<sup>10</sup> and of Pentecostal-Evangelical churches. They are challenging not only the traditional, more Sufist-oriented, Muslim faith and Orthodox Christianity, but also the secular state that is Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup> There may also be a resurgence of Orthodox-Christian belief – within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), for example via the Mahbere Qiddusan movement<sup>12</sup> – although this is largely reactive, bent on internal religious renewal and formulating an answer to Pentecostal-Evangelical churches. In large part, this momentum of resurgence after 1991 reflects the genuine search among both Muslims and Christians for spiritually fulfilling life and for community (re)organization after years of oppressive socialism (under the Derg regime of 1974–91). But it has now morphed into serious religious competition. In these polemics, many new Internet sites of Ethiopian Christians and Muslims, and especially diaspora sites, aggravate the 'debate' further in often biased and provocative ways.<sup>13</sup> I will not discuss these Internet exchanges except in passing, but they no doubt need a major study in their own right, as their impact on local Ethiopian discourse will grow.<sup>14</sup> Internet debates in turn come to serve as input for the local print media in Ethiopia, often translating and adopting diaspora discourse.

In Ethiopia's last census (2007), approximately 62 percent of the population was counted as Christian, 34 percent as Muslim, and the remainder as of traditional faiths.<sup>15</sup> The Muslims are Sunni, but with a growing

9. Fieldwork in Ethiopia (Addis Ababa, and in rural areas in the South and Wällo) was done in October 2004, in the November months of 2006, 2007, and 2008, July–August 2009, and September 2010.

10. See Terje Østebø, 'The question of becoming: Islamic reform movements in contemporary Ethiopia', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 38, 3 (2008), pp. 419, 423.

11. See the paper by a former government minister, Gebre-Ab Barnabas, 'Ethnic and religious policies of FDR Ethiopia' (paper for the First National Conference on Federalism, Conflict, and Peace Building, 5–7 May 2003, Ministry of Federal Affairs and GTZ, Addis Ababa), p. 24. It reflects the official policy of secularism, or separation of state and religion and the proscription of interference in each other's domains (Constitution, art. 11).

12. See their website: <[www.eotc-mkidusan.org](http://www.eotc-mkidusan.org)>.

13. See, for example, <<http://blog.ethiopianmuslims.net/negashi/?p=325#comment-92319>> (25 May 2009) for diaspora Muslim critiques of some Ethiopian Orthodox approaches to Islam. Christian website critiques on Muslims in Ethiopia also exist.

14. In Ethiopia itself the spoken and written word is still more important, owing to limited Internet access.

15. According to the report of the (highly contested) 2007 population census of Ethiopia, online at: <[www.csa.gov.et/pdf/Cen2007\\_firstdraft.pdf](http://www.csa.gov.et/pdf/Cen2007_firstdraft.pdf)> (20 March 2009).

number of Wahhabist-Salafist persuasion (an estimated 15 percent, not registered as such in the census data).<sup>16</sup> Within the Christian part of the population there is also a shift from Orthodox (now 43.5 percent of the Ethiopian population, a decrease compared to the 1994 census), to Evangelicalism-Pentecostalism (now 18.6 percent). Compared to 1994, Muslims increased by 1.1 percent to a total of 33.9 percent.

In these conditions of religious dynamism, strategies to reassert boundaries and identities have emerged, and have now turned into outright, often fierce, polemics. Much of it is aimed at delegitimizing the other, at 'warning' their own congregation about the other faith, and – especially in revivalist Muslim and Pentecostal circles – at 'winning converts'. The latter mainly target the Ethiopian Orthodox, while within the Muslim community the 'revivalists' or 'reformists' rant against the mainstream, Sufist-oriented Islam in Ethiopia, thereby advocating a purist and dogmatic form of Islam tending toward hegemonism and intolerance of others. In addition, Muslim reformists publicly preach against 'the mistakes' of Christianity, and Christian pastors preach against the Muslim faith and its 'encroachment'. This is a relatively new phenomenon in Ethiopian religious culture and increasingly occurs on religious holidays when crowds are gathered in or near the mosques and churches.

The subject of religious debates and polemics is obviously controversial, in Ethiopia as in other African countries, and always has the subtext of rivalry, especially when it is about the relationship between Islam and Christianity. As noted, even academic researchers – Ethiopians or foreigners – sometimes cannot avoid elements of a biased apologetic approach in favour of one faith or the other<sup>17</sup> – a failing that only close factual analysis and historical contextualization can remedy.

### *Some historical roots of 'religious competition' in Ethiopia*

Religious polemics in Ethiopia are obviously not a thing of the last 20 years only. One might even say that debates on religion started right in the infancy of Islam in the year 615, when a first group of converts to Islam arrived as 'religious migrants/refugees' sent by the Prophet Mohammed from Arabia to the court at Aksum, where they were

16. These labels are not completely unequivocal. Notably, 'Salafism' can also refer to more mainstream, moderate, pietist Islamic currents that would not agree to being described as radical or 'fundamentalist'. But they refer to 'reformist', stricter forms of Islam that reject Sufism, saint veneration, Mawlid celebration. On the Bale region in Ethiopia see Terje Østebo, *A History of Islam and Inter-Religious Relations in Bale, Ethiopia* (Almqvist and Wiksell International, Stockholm, 2005), and also his 'The question of becoming'.

17. Hussein Ahmed, 'Coexistence and/or confrontation? Towards a reappraisal of Christian-Muslim encounter in contemporary Ethiopia', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36, 1 (2006), pp. 4–22.

questioned with interest about their new faith by the emperor. The debate that emerged in theological (and later historical) studies as to the possible conversion to Islam of the then emperor ʿIlla Aṣama (asserted in certain Arabic letters cited by Arab sources) is still not concluded and can be seen as a first (seventh-century) occasion of ‘polemic’ – an exchange of views about the virtues of their respective religions.<sup>18</sup> A history of both peaceful exchange and armed confrontations between religious political units (such as the Christian empire or the Muslim sultanates in the east) as well as steady expansion of Christianity and Islam followed. Critical episodes were the devastating sixteenth-century war between the troops of the Harar-based Muslim leader Ahmed ibn Ibrahim (nicknamed ‘Gragñ’) and the highland Christian state, starting in 1529. It led to a major surge of ideological rivalry and polemics. While no doubt demographic and economic pressures induced Muslim population movements, religious-ideological elements in themselves became the motivating force. The eyewitness account by Šihab ad-Din (*Futūh al-Habaša*)<sup>19</sup> is replete with violent religious discourse slighting the Christians and aimed at the destruction of their heritage, motivated by religious argument and rhetoric.<sup>20</sup> Somewhat comparable polemical comments from the Christian side can be found in the royal chronicles of the time, written in Ge’ez.

A second critical phase was in the late nineteenth century. Although interaction and intermingling of northern Muslim and Christian elites had occurred throughout the centuries (notably in the eighteenth), whereby political power and claims to sovereignty and territory rather than religion in itself were the central issues, in the late nineteenth century conflict came into the open. First under Emperor Tewodros (1855–68) in the mid-1860s, and more importantly under Emperor Yohannis (1878–89) who, faced with Egyptian and Sudanese-Mahdist threats to Ethiopia, called for national unity in the political and ideological sense. In 1878 he issued an edict calling for mass conversion of the Muslims in Ethiopia, a proclamation as rare in Ethiopian history as it was unproductive. He made strenuous efforts to have people converted, especially in the northern Wällo area. Thousands were, but the campaign provoked resistance, including armed revolt and renewed religious polemics, especially in works by Muslim ‘ulema from northern Ethiopia.

18. Some sources suggest that this first *hijra* occurred when his son Armah was emperor. There seems no doubt that the latter in fact was an Orthodox Christian.

19. Šihāb ad-Dīn (Arab-Faqīh), translated by P. L. Stenhouse and annotated by R. Pankhurst, *Futūh al-Habaša. The Conquest of Abyssinia [16th Century]* (Tsehai Publishers, Hollywood, 2003 [originally written c. 1535]).

20. Šihāb ad-Dīn, *Futūh al-Habaša*, p. 26. The *Futūh al-Habaša* also clearly demonstrates the overriding urge of Ahmed ibn Ibrahim to convert the Christians. On his use of violence, see for example Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A history* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1987), pp. 88–9.



Yohannis was killed in 1889 fighting the Mahdist invasion in western Ethiopia, and his successor Emperor Menilik II (1889–1913) reverted to a largely accommodative policy, allowing people to live ‘in the faith of their fathers’, despite the challenge posed by his own conquests of new Muslim-populated areas in the south and east.

*Policies of Emperor Haile Sellassie (1930–74) and the Derg regime (1974–91)*

Under Emperor Haile Sellassie a Byzantine-Christian-inspired imperial ideology dominated national politics, which led to the denial of full citizenship to Muslims. They suffered from discrimination such as widespread exclusion from legal title to land and access to high-level public jobs. The problematic basis of a common civic identity was never resolved, because the Christian basis and political symbolism of the state did not allow full incorporation of Ethiopians of different religious backgrounds. After 1944 Islamic courts were recognized (for personal, family, and inheritance law), however, and no persecution or conversion campaigns *vis-à-vis* Muslims were mounted. Day-to-day relations between Muslims and Christians were usually good, perhaps in part because of mutual ignorance of the exact religious ideas of the other faith. To Emperor Haile Sellassie is attributed the famous saying ‘The country is a public, religion a private matter’. Although this was no doubt a healthy principle in state affairs, he himself did not follow it, instead keeping Orthodox Christianity as the virtual state religion.<sup>21</sup> He also discouraged any political expression of Ethiopian Muslims as Muslims, but allowed them to freely practise their religion. In the 1950s the Emperor also, for the first time in history, had the Koran translated into Amharic and published. But historical Ethiopian-Orthodox dominance was maintained, implying restrictions on Islamic self-expression and self-organization. While Muslim publications appeared in this period, no major religious polemical literature came out; at least, none caused uproar in the public domain. But on the local level, polemical works and preaching by both sides must have been produced regularly, as the example of an unpublished critique of the Orthodox faith by one Sheikh Sa’id Ahmād of Dābat in Borāna-Wāllō reveals.<sup>22</sup>

During Emperor Haile Sellassie’s reign, however, the internal Muslim debate on ‘which Islam’ and the nature of Islamic renewal that would

21. As to his cautious policy towards the Muslim world, the works of Haggai Erlich provide many clues: see *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt and the Nile* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO and London, 2002) and *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity and politics entwined* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO and London, 2007). For more on Saudi Arabia’s policy towards Ethiopia in the 1960s, see Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia*, pp. 106–7.

22. See Éloi Ficquet, ‘Une apologie éthiopienne de l’Islam’, *Annales d’Éthiopie* 18 (2003), pp. 7–36.



erupt in the post-1991 years were already foreshadowed in the rivalry between two Ethiopian (Harari) Muslim religious figures: Sheikh Abdallah ibn Muhammad al Harari, the leader of Sufist-oriented Islam and principled advocate of religious coexistence and Ethiopian Islam,<sup>23</sup> and Sheikh Yusuf 'Abd al-Rahman, a Saudi-Arabia-trained Salafist-Wahhabist-leaning leader.<sup>24</sup> While they both lived outside Ethiopia for long periods, at times banned by the government, they inspired a new round of 'verbal warfare' in the 1990s about their respective approaches to Islam, both based in Islamic theology. Sheikh Abdallah had built up an important civic-religious movement in Lebanon after his exile, but retained influence in Ethiopia through his many writings, while Sheikh Yusuf also continued to influence events in Ethiopia (notably in the Muslim education system and in the turn to Salafist 'reform movements') from his home base in Saudi Arabia. Their rivalry can also be seen as a religious polemic on specific points of Islamic doctrine,<sup>25</sup> and remained important throughout the post-1991 period. Many Islamic polemical exchanges in Ethiopia hence still move between the two poles of this debate.

After 1974 the Derg regime recognized Islam and accorded equal rights to it. It attacked the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) as a 'bastion of feudalism', expropriated its landed property including most of its urban real estate, and ended its receipt of government subsidies. Muslims made significant gains, including recognition of their religious holidays, less job discrimination, more mosque building, and a higher hajj quota. However, the Derg, in Marxist vein, saw both religions as things of the past, a brake on 'development', and suppressed their public manifestation and institutional growth. Both Orthodox Christianity and Islam were forced to restrict their public activities and foreign contacts.

*The EPRDF era after 1991: revivalism and polemical consciousness*

The EPRDF regime instituted more freedoms, but brought the Ethiopian Orthodox Church under greater state control and continued its marginalization in public life. Under government pressure in 1992 the EOC Patriarch was replaced by a more regime-friendly one, still in power in 2011. Under the post-1991 regime, Islam was further supported: Friday public office hours were adapted to the mosque prayer

23. He underlined the importance of *i'tidāl* or 'moderation', and recognized the fact of religious plurality.

24. See the interesting study by Mustafa Kabha and Haggai Erlich, 'Al-Ahbash and Wahhabiyya: interpretations of Islam', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, 4 (2006), pp. 519–38.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 530–3.

times; the legal status of religious (shari'a) courts was solidified; and a big expansion of Muslim religious education and mosque building with foreign funding was allowed. But especially after 1995, when an intra-Muslim conflict between two groups in the Anwar Mosque in Addis Ababa killed several people, Muslim organizations were also closely monitored. New Christian and Islamic NGOs emerged as well, several from abroad and with clear proselytizing aims. The quota for hajj travellers was greatly increased, and a freer, private religious press became active. A large number of foreign Islamic teachers came to Ethiopia to teach at new Islamic schools, and many Ethiopian Muslims went for training abroad. Pentecostal-Evangelical colleges also expanded, bringing new teachers and training local Ethiopian staff. In general, foreign funding for religious life in Ethiopia greatly increased, both for Protestant-Evangelical churches and for Muslim institutions. As reported in the Ethiopian press, this also led to new forms of foreign interference.<sup>26</sup>

Under the new constitution (1995), Ethiopia remained a secular state,<sup>27</sup> a model that worked but one that the Christian and Muslim establishments, as well as the new militant groups, were reluctant to accept. In November 1994 a Muslim demonstration in Addis Ababa demanded that shari'a be included in the constitution. This was rejected by the authorities, as it would jeopardize religious equality and the basis of a neutral state. The Muslim claim was seen by the authorities and many members of the public as going beyond a simple demand for equality, and demonstrated the thin line between political and religious ideas in Islam. Many in Ethiopia, notably non-Muslims, rejected the re-introduction of religion as a constitutional principle.

With the dawn of press freedom in the early years of the new regime, several dozen new Islamic periodicals emerged,<sup>28</sup> all in Amharic and some of them containing small sections in Arabic. Much of the early

26. The Ethiopian magazine *Reporter* of 29 December 2003 quoted two senior Ethiopian Muslim officials saying that Saudi Arabia had provided some 4 million riyal (some US \$800,000) to support the Wahhabist faction in the elections for the National Ethiopian Council (Majlis) for Islamic Affairs.

27. Ibrahim Idris, 'Freedom of religion and secularization of the state: the legal status of Islamic law and Sharia courts in Ethiopia', in H. G. Marcus (ed.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies: Papers of the Twelfth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, 1994* (Red Sea Press, Lawrenceville, NJ, 1994), Vol. 2, pp. 151–6.

28. These were: *Najashi* (1992), *Da'wa* (1992), *Bilal* (1992/3), *al-Manar* (1993), *Hikma* (1993), *al-Risala* (1993), *Adhan*, *Salam*, *Furqan*, *Hilal*, *Ihsan*, *Hayat*, *Baraka*, *Ihkla*, *al-Hijab* (for women), *Hijra*, *al-Quds*, *al-Kawthar*, *Ze-Harari Taba* (in Harar), *al-Islam*, *Sawatul Islam*, *Quddis*, and *Salafiyya*. The state-owned Muslim weekly *Al Alām* (in Amharic and Arabic) had existed since 1942.

content of these news magazines was discussed by Tim Carmichael, Alessandro Gori, and the late Hussein Ahmed,<sup>29</sup> and gives clear evidence of the renewed self-consciousness of the Muslim community.

With these journals came a surge of polemical contributions, directed by Muslim reformists to their own constituency attempting to combat 'lax religious attitudes', but also aimed at asserting the superiority and rights of the one faith above others. There were articles on the alleged fundamentalism among Muslims in Ethiopia, responding to articles in the general Ethiopian press; pieces on the need for *da'wa* ('call to Islam') and Islamic consciousness; and on defending the interests of the Muslims in the country, for example through expansion of shari'a law courts and hajj pilgrimage, creating more prayer space and prayer time in school and offices, and supporting the wearing of the female veil in public institutions.<sup>30</sup> There were also some articles trying to rewrite Ethiopian history, in a rather biased manner.<sup>31</sup>

A religious-revivalist trend was also visible among the Christian population, perhaps to a lesser, or different, extent. The Christian church organizations, however, also initiated religious newspapers and other publications for larger audiences. Among them were four magazines published by the EOC: *Mälläkät* (from September 1993), *Astireyo* (1993), *Simi'a Tidiq*, *Hämmär* (1993, founded by EOC's Mahbere Qiddusan association), and *Akotate* (1994).<sup>32</sup> The Pentecostal-Evangelical groups similarly produced several magazines.<sup>33</sup> Most Christian organizations have more recently started to produce DVDs, VCDs and MP3 files to promote religious doctrine, liturgy, religious songs, and other consciousness-raising material. For the EOC this assertive 'missionary' moment was a relatively new thing, as historically they were not geared to active conversion or revivalist efforts.

29. Tim C. Carmichael, 'Contemporary Ethiopian discourse on Islamic history: the politics of historical representation', *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara* 10 (1996), pp. 169–86; Alessandro Gori, 'Contemporary and historical Muslim scholars as portrayed by the Ethiopian Islamic press in the 1990s', *Aethiopica* 8 (2005), pp. 72–94; Hussein Ahmed, 'Islam and Islamic discourse in Ethiopia (1973–1993)', in H. G. Marcus (ed.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies: Papers of the Twelfth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, 1994* (Red Sea Press, Lawrenceville, NJ, 1994), Vol. 1, pp. 775–801; 'Islamic literature and religious revival in Ethiopia (1991–1994)', *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara* 12 (1998), pp. 89–108; and 'Recent Islamic periodicals in Ethiopia (1991–1994)', *Northeast African Studies* (N. S.) 5, 2 (1998), pp. 7–21.

30. Hussein, 'Islamic literature and religious revival in Ethiopia', pp. 101–2.

31. Carmichael, 'Contemporary Ethiopian discourse on Islamic history', pp. 177, 183.

32. As with the Islamic papers, many of the EOC publications disappeared after some years, but *Mälläkät*, *Simi'a Tidiq*, *Hämmär* and *Zéna Betä-Kristeyan* (the oldest EOC paper, since 1955) are still appearing, each with a circulation of over 10,000 copies.

33. *Miskar*, *Karisma*, *Muli'at*, *Gäsame*, *Matyetis*, and *Impakt* are some of the many Evangelical-Protestant papers.

On the side of Christian and more secular-minded writers, in the past years pleas were made in the regular press – the general private news magazines of the 1990s, like *T'obbia*, *Mogäd*, *T'omar*, *Minilik*, *Muday*, *Béza*, *Mäqdala*, *Ethop*,<sup>34</sup> now all gone – to keep the 'Ethiopian model' of accommodative inter-religious relations and not blight it with extremism and messages of intolerance, as advocated by some of the religious activists, notably those under the influence of Salafism-Wahhabism and some Pentecostals. While such contributions can be considered polemical, they were of a different nature from the proselytizing or reformist prose mentioned earlier. These magazines nevertheless regularly contained unsubstantiated and sometimes alarmist reporting on the perceived Muslim threat.

Internal strife and political pressure from the state after the 1995 violent incident at the Anwar Mosque, as well as the Somali Al Ittihad al Islami bomb attacks in Addis Ababa in 1995–6, led to public outcry and government suspicion, and indirectly to the closure of a number of Islamic periodicals. Some Islamic organizations were also closed down by the government.<sup>35</sup> In 1998 the number of periodicals had already gone down to eight and in 2008 only *al-Islam*, *Salafiyya*, *Quddis* and *Sawatul Islam* remained. Most of the Christian and general news magazines mentioned above are now defunct, succumbing either to government pressure or commercial collapse.<sup>36</sup> It should be noted, however, that since the late 1990s religious news and messages have issued increasingly via the new media. These materials (DVDs, VCDs) are available not only near churches and mosques but also at crowded pilgrimage sites on religious holidays. Religious books and leaflets also continue to be sold.<sup>37</sup>

In the Muslim community, in addition to a spate of newspaper articles on Islam (and its relations to the state and to Christianity), some highly controversial texts appeared. In 1994 a document in Arabic, 'Luqta Ta'rikhiyya' ('Historical notes') circulated in the Muslim city of Harar. Written by a Harari, it gave a quite polemical and historically skewed vision of Christian–Muslim relations in Ethiopia, attacking the 'Amhara expansion' of Christianity, glorifying Islam in Ethiopia, and calling for rectification of the 'historical oppression of Muslims by the Christians'. It ignored notions and practices of cooperation or coexistence. Not even the episode of the first Muslim refugees at the court of the seventh-century

34. See, for a first inventory, Jacques Bureau, 'Naissance d'une nouvelle presse éthiopienne', *Bulletin de la Maison des Etudes Ethiopiennes* 5 (1996), pp. 19–34.

35. Such as the activist Ethiopian Muslims Youth Association.

36. The average readership of these magazines remained small, from about 3,000 to 8,000, with some exceptions.

37. Satellite TV stations from abroad will also become important.

Ethiopian emperor was mentioned.<sup>38</sup> This 'history' may have emanated from the circle of Yusuf 'Abd al-Rahman, the influential Salafist Harari sheikh living in Saudi Arabia who was mentioned earlier.

After 1991, a greater foreign impact on Ethiopian Muslim polemics could be discerned. Many more Ethiopian Muslims received religious training abroad, and many translations of Egyptian, Pakistani, Sudanese, and South African books on Islam were published,<sup>39</sup> thus showing the reconnection of Ethiopian Islam to global Islam.<sup>40</sup> This also led to the growing and persistent denigration of forms of local Islam and Sufism in Ethiopia. In Egyptian and Saudi Arabian publications on Ethiopia arguments are found that make their way into Ethiopian Muslim polemics that often give inaccurate and tendentious pictures of Ethiopian history, and this further troubles public discussion on religious relations.<sup>41</sup>

Muslim polemical tracts were often works (translated into Amharic) of foreign Islamic revivalists like the Pakistani author of Salafist persuasion A. al-Mawdudi, or *da'wa* activists, like the influential South African Muslim propagandist Ahmed Deedat (1918–2005),<sup>42</sup> and the younger Indian Muslim writer-preacher Zakir Naik. The latter's work was distributed in large quantities in translation in Ethiopia, with some eight titles in circulation in recent years (books and VCDs).

The enlarged space for Islamic and Pentecostal self-expression and organization has had certain side-effects, and some groups have threatened the Orthodox-Christian heritage in the country directly: Østebø mentioned the existence of the 'Islamic African Relief Agency', reputedly accused of looting Orthodox churches.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Christian spokesmen and several priests have started 'warning' people in statements and sermons about Muslim designs and 'radicalism', with growing references to theological arguments. In the general press and on various websites, strongly polemical papers were published on the 'Wahhabist-fundamentalist' danger within the Muslim community of Ethiopia.<sup>44</sup> Books by the EOC

38. Carmichael, 'Contemporary Ethiopian discourse on Islamic history', pp. 170, 183; and Terje Østebø, 'Creating a new identity: the position of Ethiopian Muslims in contemporary perspective', *Svensk Mission Tidskrift* 86, 3 (1998), pp. 447–8.

39. Hussein Ahmed, 'Islamic literature and religious revival in Ethiopia', p. 90.

40. See also Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia*, Chapter 7.

41. See notably Erlich, *The Cross and the River*, pp. 106–7, on the work of Egyptian writer Yusuf Ahmad.

42. See Abul A'la al-Mawdudi, *Guidelines for People Doing Da'wa* (Najash Printing Enterprise, Addis Ababa, 1996, in Amharic) and David Westerlund, 'Ahmed Deedat's theology of religion: apologetics through polemics', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, 3 (2003), pp. 263–78. Also Chesworth, 'Fundamentalism and outreach strategies in East Africa', p. 172.

43. See Østebø, 'Creating a new identity', p. 432.

44. Alem Zelalem, 'Saudi Arabia's Wahabism and the threat to Ethiopia's national security', 2003, <[http://ethiomeia.com/press/wahabism\\_threat\\_to\\_ethiopia.html](http://ethiomeia.com/press/wahabism_threat_to_ethiopia.html)> (15 October

cleric Abba Samuel (*Do We Have Religious Tolerance in Ethiopia?*), Orthodox writer Efrem (*Fanatic Islamism in Ethiopia*), and some others have continued the trend of expressing fear of growing Muslim influence.<sup>45</sup> Writers in Muslim periodicals consistently tried to refute the danger of 'Muslim fundamentalism'. Whether or not these fears are justified, there are certainly many more reports of coordinated conversion and *da'wa* efforts in Ethiopia, than there are on Pentecostal activities. As Østebø has also suggested,<sup>46</sup> their high level of informality makes the extent of these activities difficult to investigate.

Many other events pointed to the sharpened antagonism between (parts of) the Christian and Muslim communities. In the past decade, dozens of incidents were reported in the press, from clashes in Addis Ababa, Harar, Kemise, and Gondar, to killings and church burnings in the Jimma area and Begi (2006),<sup>47</sup> or in Agarro, Alaba (2005) and Wolenkomi towns (2010). Public displays of collective religious celebration in proximity of the house of worship of another faith often evoked enmity and led to clashes. In January 2009 an Ethiopian newspaper reported the arrest of 18 Islamist militants, allegedly members of an armed group advocating for a theocracy to be violently enforced in Ethiopia, preparing terrorist actions, and urging people neither to pay taxes to the state nor obey the 'man-made constitution'.<sup>48</sup> Without going into the details of these clashes, suffice it to say that such incidents are much more numerous than under any previous regime.

Most of the Muslim polemical contributions in news magazines were initially directed to the Ethiopian Muslims themselves, not to Christians, exhorting readers to be better Muslims and cherish their own faith. Involvement in *da'wa* and improving Islamic self-organization were stressed. They also spurred people to be critical of the Christian faith and often ridiculed the nature of the trinity, the *tabot*,<sup>49</sup> the divinity of Christ, and alcohol (ab)use. There were not many appeals to Christians to

2006); and Johannis Sebhātu, 'The emergence of radical Islam in Ethiopia (1991–2004)', <[http://ethiomeia.com/commentary/radical\\_islam\\_in\\_ethiopia.html](http://ethiomeia.com/commentary/radical_islam_in_ethiopia.html)> (5 August 2007).

45. See Abba Samuel, *Do We Have Religious Tolerance in Ethiopia?* (Mega Printing, Addis Ababa, 2007, in Amharic), and Efrem Eshäte, *Fanatic Islamism in Ethiopia* (Ethio-Tiqur Abay Printing, Addis Ababa, 2008, in Amharic).

46. Østebø, 'The question of belonging', p. 421.

47. According to Terje Østebø, *Islamism in the Horn of Africa: Assessing ideology, actors and objectives* (ILPI, Oslo, 2010), p. 23, this may have been the work of 'Takfir wal-Hijra' groups.

48. 'Bä-haymanot sām yäšibbir tāgbar fäsəməwal yätäbale tassäru', Addis Admas, 24 January 2009, at <[www.addisadmas.com/news/news\\_item.asp?NewsID=1204](http://www.addisadmas.com/news/news_item.asp?NewsID=1204)> (25 January 2009).

49. The material symbol of the Biblical 'ark of the covenant', venerated in each Orthodox church.



engage in dialogue or common tasks in the context of Ethiopia's wider societal problems and national identity.

In the Ethiopian Christian tradition a few polemical works that were directed at non-Christians appeared. An important polemicist and defender of Ethiopian Christianity in the early 1990s was Kidanä-Mariyam Getahun, who published at least three books on the subject in 1991–5, the last being *Yä-Muslimu inna yä-Kristiyanu Wiyiyit*<sup>50</sup> ('Exchanges of a Muslim and a Christian', a response to a similarly entitled book by Muslim writer Qāmār Yusuf). Kidanä-Mariyam later also wrote against the Pentecostal-Protestant faith.

In 1998 an Evangelical Christian, Mäsmärä Solomon, published *May It Reach My Muslim Compatriots* (*Yidräs läMuslim Wägänoch*), criticizing Islam. This book in its turn evoked a polemical response in the Muslim periodical *Hikma*.<sup>51</sup> Later in the same year, the retired university lecturer Alämayyāhu Mogäs published *Why Did I Not Become a Muslim?* (*Lämən Alsällāmhū?*),<sup>52</sup> which was his quite provocative and forcefully worded reply to, among others, the booklet *Is Jesus God?* by Ahmed Deedat, the *da'wa* activist whose impact was growing in Ethiopia in the early 1990s.<sup>53</sup> The Muslim response to Alämayyāhu's publication was one of indignation at the author's abrasive style and remarks deemed insulting. The book led to a court case and it was suppressed for some time.<sup>54</sup> It was a harsh though original contribution to the religious debate with a survey of reasons for choosing not to accept Islam, strongly refuting the polemical points on Christianity made by some Muslims. In 2007 a book edited by Orthodox-Christian cleric Abba Samuel (with three printings in one year) also specifically answered the Ahmed Deedat publications<sup>55</sup> and went on to pay attention to what the author regarded as the worrying Wahhabist phenomenon in Ethiopia.

As noted above, many of the polemical exchanges in Ethiopia started as internal, intra-confessional debate, with reformist Christians and Muslims speaking to their own presumed constituency and giving advice on how to 'properly' conduct religious life. The Pentecostal movement, with its emphasis on spiritual rebirth and personal renewal and accepting the mediating and liberating force of Christ through the Holy Spirit, and the

50. Published by the EOC, Addis Ababa, 1995.

51. *Hikma* 55 (1998).

52. No publisher stated, Addis Ababa, 1997 (in Amharic).

53. For an analysis of the man and his work, see Samadia Sadouni, 'Le minoritaire sud-africain Ahmed Deedat, une figure originale de la Da'wa', *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara* 12 (1998), pp. 149–70, and Westerlund, 'Ahmed Deedat's theology of religion'. Several of Deedat's polemical works circulate in Ethiopia.

54. It was again available after the author's death in 2002.

55. For instance, Ahmed Deedat, *Is Jesus Really the Creator/God?* (Najash Printing Enterprise, Addis Ababa, 1995, in Amharic).



strict and scriptural Salafist and Wahhabi movements within Islam are prime examples of this trend towards conversion and purist 'rebirth', and as such are not new in the history of either religion. Often the antagonisms within the two traditions (EOC vs Pentecostals, or mainstream Islam vs Wahhabi-Salafiyya) seemed stronger than those between them. In 2002 for instance, the book *Takfir: Correcting the misrepresentation of history*<sup>56</sup> addressed the problem of the radical-violent Takfir wal-Hijra movement in Islam and the faulty assertions of such foreign-inspired Muslim groups on Ethiopia's place in Islamic history. In 1994–5 a local Takfir wal-Hijra group was reported to be active in Gondar, and later also in Addis Ababa.<sup>57</sup> This reflects the ongoing tension between mainstream and radical Muslims. This situation has its parallel in the Christian community with the tension between the Orthodox Christians and the Evangelical-Pentecostal faiths.<sup>58</sup> Despite all this, however, in recent years the internal polemics have been increasingly turned into 'external' polemics, more directly challenging the Christian or Muslim 'opponent'. There is no doubt that a 'battle' for souls and for power is going on that has invaded public space, and this may carry challenges for the secular state order.

### *Recurring themes in religious polemics*

Analysing the contents of religious (Christian–Muslim) polemics<sup>59</sup> in Ethiopia, one can discern several recurring themes. A major focus is on the core theological differences: Jesus as God/Messiah or human being/prophet; the reality and meaning of the crucifixion; the nature and unity of God/Allah and the idea of the Trinity; Mohammed as the 'last prophet'; and so on. Here polemics tackle the 'truth content' of religious tenets, which are then argued about in a question–response procedure.

56. Hasan Tau, *Takfir: Correcting the misrepresentation of history* (Mega Printing, Addis Ababa, 2002, in Amharic). 'Takfir' literally means declaring someone *kafir*, 'non-believer', non-Muslim. It is a loose radical-militant movement with its origins in Egypt in the 1960s, even condemning ('ex-communicating') all Muslims not of their persuasion as non-believers, to be opposed with all means. For the purpose of combating their opponents and to hide themselves, they can break all the religious rules of Islam (thus practising *taqiyya* to its limits).

57. Østebø, 'The question of becoming', pp. 422–3.

58. The record of a vehement polemic between an Evangelical pastor and an EOC preacher can be seen on the website EthioTube, <<http://www.ethiotube.net/video/12122/Ethiopian-Orthodox-Church-Response-to-Protestant-Pastor-14>>, where the latter accused the former of spiritual jihad against the EOC.

59. Both religions in their various shades reject the indigenous-traditional religions in Ethiopia, usually labelled with the denigrating Amharic term *arāmāne* (heathen, animist, uncivilized). The epithet is incorrect, as most of these systems (among the Borana Oromo, for example) have a developed moral rule system and a belief in divine force. In more recent Christian works the term used is *ahzab*, while the Arabic term is *kufur*.

Occasionally this discourse turns into an attempt to completely delegitimize the faith of others. In many of today's polemical writings, there are also repeated accusations of 'having tampered with God's word', with the Holy Books (the Bible or the Koran) allegedly not giving the 'real, correct word of God/Allah'. Such accusations are well-known from the polemical traditions of the monotheist religions elsewhere, and are often fanciful and unhistorical from a scholarly point of view.

Historical issues – like the alleged conversion to Islam of Nigus Ila Ašama mentioned above – also figure prominently. Was the Ethiopian emperor converted to Islam almost fifteen centuries ago by the first Muslims at his court, or not? While later the Prophet Mohammed is reported to have told the Arab Muslims to 'leave the Ethiopians alone as long as they don't bother you' – implying coexistence and respect for the Ethiopian emperor's positive role in maintaining the original Islamic community – militant Muslims ignore this point and focus on the 'stolen heritage' of a Muslim Ethiopia: after the alleged conversion of the emperor ('Ahmed al-Najashi') the country should have been made an integral part of the Muslim 'umma, but this was prevented by Ethiopian-Christian obstruction.<sup>60</sup> This point always comes up in religious polemics, symposia, public gatherings, and other combative settings, whereupon a nuanced view of the historical facts known so far usually falls by the wayside.

Another issue is that of the qualitative differences in conversion attitudes and strategies. Among Muslims, the Salafist-Wahhabi groups notably aimed at wholesale expansion and conversion via *da'wa*, first within the Muslim community itself, and then among others. Orthodox Christians (the EOC), knowing they were dominant, long had no active conversion strategies, but largely as a response have now developed a more active profile in this regard. This also has the effect of the EOC becoming more intolerant of 'deviant' or lax religious practices among believers. Pentecostal and Evangelical groups see proselytizing and conversion as a core task of their activity. They reject any local cultural practices – like traditional rituals, saint worship, ancestor veneration, and performance of historical poetry or epics – that 'interfere' with their service to God.

Similarly, there are arguments about the recognition of religious courts, holidays, places, and times for prayer, notably in public buildings, in the context of the secular state. Since 1974 Muslim public holidays are to be

60. See Erlich, *The Cross and the River*, p. 205; and Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia*, p. 165. Also Mohammed Taib Abun Mohammed ibn Yusuf Abu Yusuf, *Ethiopia and Islam (Part 1): Nigus Najashi* (Najashi Islamic Printing Enterprise, Addis Ababa, 1998, in Amharic).

celebrated publicly, and forms and places of worship recognized officially. But 35 years of internal debate, growing empowerment, and assumption of their place in public life since the positive measures of the Derg in 1974–5 and the EPRDF government since 1991 have not precluded Muslims from continuing to raise the issue of their ‘disadvantaged position’. While much could still be improved, as for the Christians, this culture of complaint has been lamented even in various Islamic magazine articles.<sup>61</sup>

In the post-1991 era, much contestation emerged on the recognition of areas and ethnic groups in Ethiopia (within the ethnic-federal system) as ‘Muslim’ or ‘Christian’, with resultant financial and political rewards. A recent case in point is the Silt’e Gurage, a Muslim group officially split off from the larger Gurage-speaking people, now with their own political administrative unit (‘zone’). This in turn led to a growing influence of a stricter, revivalist Islam in this zone. An issue related to this is the debate on the nature and role of the state in general: in Ethiopia a secular state recognizing the right to choose one’s religion and keeping proper distance between state and religious life is constitutionally established, but continued ‘ethnic’-territorial disputes and controversy over the range of religious law have maintained constant pressure on this model. In this political context, the debate on the status or extension of shari’a law in Ethiopia – resisted by the state, the Christians, and the more secular-minded – also continues.

A new phenomenon is that of the ‘acoustic wars’: there is an emerging ‘discourse’ via massive religious noise production. Microphones attached to every church, mosque, and chapel pound out sermons, religious services, calls to prayer, and religious songs, enveloping people who may not want or need to hear them. This has become a new battlefield in religious polemics and manifestly encroaches on public space. Informants note that the religious noise wakes up people in the early morning hours, disturbs the peace, and intimidates the public – which dares not protest.

Underlying much of the struggle is ‘religious demography’. There have always been arguments over the number of Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, even if the data come from the Central Statistical Agency (CSA), a professional institution that has long maintained good standards. The public suspicion against the CSA data started with the 1994 census, when the Prime Minister’s office first withheld the preliminary data reports for almost a year. The same happened with the 2007 census data, when again publication was delayed by more than eight months, and the public’s perception was that the authorities were tampering with the data. There is no

61. For example in *Bilal* 6 (February 1993) as cited in Carmichael, ‘Contemporary Ethiopian discourse on Islamic history’, p. 76.

way to ascertain this. In the latest census report, the number of Ethiopian Orthodox dropped and the Muslim figure increased (see above). Both the EOC<sup>62</sup> and the Muslim leaders strongly protested, saying their numbers were far too low.<sup>63</sup> The day the census results were to be published, the government sent extra police to the predominantly Muslim areas of Addis Ababa, notably Mercato. The only ones happy at the census outcome, apparently, were the Evangelical-Pentecostal congregations: they were more than 18 percent of the total population, an indeed surprising growth in numbers. This rivalry about population figures, however, bodes ill for a sound public discussion and population policy in Ethiopia. It may also reveal a mistaken attitude among believers as to the importance of numbers of faith communities in a constitutional, secularly defined state.

The polemical approach can also be seen in various concrete issues of controversy visible in the landscape, such as the building of new churches and mosques. Their number has increased greatly since 1991, especially the mosques, but there is growing resistance and argument over locations. A notably controversial case was the proposed mosque in the old city of Aksum, a highly symbolic place, where construction has so far been refused, due to the town's role as EOC 'capital' – the reputed site of the Ark of the Covenant (*Tabor*) – and the adamant refusal of the EOC clergy to change Aksum's status.<sup>64</sup> The same refusal is heard in the old Christian town of Lalibela. In Addis Ababa, few if any restrictions on mosque building were imposed. In addition, there is debate on the recognition and construction of historical monuments. Frequently, rows erupt over the veneration of historical places. An interesting case was the projected monument in the regional state of Amhara commemorating Ahmed ibn Ibrahim 'Grag'n', whom the authorities described simply as 'a historical figure'. In the late 1990s the government authorized the monument and construction was started. But the work was vehemently opposed by local people and many Christians in the country at large, because of the destructive legacy of Ahmed.<sup>65</sup> In fact, the monument under construction was destroyed twice in night attacks, and finally the

62. See <[www.eotc-mkidusan.org/English/News/index\\_January10\\_2009.htm](http://www.eotc-mkidusan.org/English/News/index_January10_2009.htm)> (5 February 2009).

63. See: 'Ethiopia: Muslim critics reject national census for "missing millions"', <[www.jimmatimes.com/article/Around\\_Ethiopia/Around\\_Ethiopia/Muslim\\_critics\\_reject\\_national\\_census\\_for\\_missing\\_millions/31653](http://www.jimmatimes.com/article/Around_Ethiopia/Around_Ethiopia/Muslim_critics_reject_national_census_for_missing_millions/31653)> (5 January 2009); and a diaspora protest, 'Ethiopian Muslims protested in front of Ethiopian embassy in Washington DC', <<http://amalethiopia.wordpress.com/2009/03/20/ethiopian-muslims-protested-washington-dc/>> (17 April 2009).

64. EOC believers always point out that in Mecca it is not allowed to build any Christian church.

65. In public hearings before construction started, one priest asked the authorities: 'Could you please tell us what exactly are the achievements of Ahmed Gragn?' Interview with an informant from Gondar, in Addis Ababa, 4 December 2006.

project was given up. When the authorities searched for the culprits, local people said: 'We do not know who did this. Probably it's the work of a couple of baboons.'<sup>66</sup>

There have also been suddenly escalating physical clashes or riots between believers after alleged 'insults' – as in Kemise town in 2001, in Harar in 2001, and in Jimma and Gore in 2006, where people were killed and property looted or destroyed. This is a relatively new trend. Other physical violence was seen in the destruction of churches in the Jimma area and the arson attacks by Muslim militants on dozens of Sufi mosques.

Finally, within Ethiopia the written press as well as the newly distributed CDs, DVDs, VCDs and MP3 files with speeches, sermons, and teachings are very important in inter-religious polemics.<sup>67</sup> Especially in the diaspora, the Ethiopian websites and blogs (and YouTube) are taking over as sites of debate, competition, and mutual recrimination.<sup>68</sup> On the web there is, however, a growing proliferation of small constituencies on both sides and in many shades, attacking virtually any position expressed on any subject: against the Ethiopian government and its policy towards the Christian churches and/or the Muslims, against secularism, against Sufi Islam and its sheikhs and shrines, against the celebration of Mawlid (the birthday of the Prophet), against the Orthodox Church, against the Mahbere Qiddusan, against the Wahhabi, against the Salafists, against certain academics, against the Pentecostal groups, against the Protestant churches ... Needless to say, this bewildering array of usually negative opinions and comments on the Web may serve to vent every blogger's or website visitor's irritation, but in good polemical fashion they do not seem to improve religious dialogue or coexistence, and within Ethiopia meaningful debate is neither very visible nor very effective.

### *Socio-political impact of religious polemics*

Religious polemics in Ethiopia take on many forms, enormously stimulated by the possibilities of new mass media and communication

66. Interview with informant from Gondar, Addis Ababa, 4 December 2006. A recent book by Teshome Berhanu Kemal, *Imam Ahmed Ibrahim (Ahmed Gagn)* (Addis Ababa, 2008) contends that the Christians were responsible for the failure of this project.

67. One recent example is the four-part VCD *Tallaq Fät'ächa* ('The Big Confrontation', published in 2008 by the 'Orthodox Spiritual Music Department', Addis Ababa), the answer of a young Orthodox-Christian preacher (Mihrete-Ab Asäffa) to a similarly entitled VCD by Dr Zakir Naik, the Indian-Muslim *da'wa* preacher criticizing Christianity. There is also a strong increase in Bluetooth file exchange on cell phones.

68. One Ethiopian Muslim weblog is <<http://blog.ethiopianmuslims.net/negashi>>. For other aspects of Ethiopian Muslim diaspora activity, see Dereje Feyissa, 'Setting a social reform agenda in the homeland: the identity politics of Ethiopian Muslims in the diaspora' (Working Paper 3, Diaspeace Project, University of Jyväskylä, Finland).

technologies, and are serious business. Their pace and intensity have increased, reflecting the renewed self-consciousness of faith communities but also giving the impression of verbal warfare. Indeed, a content analysis of religious polemics shows that they have turned into full-blown apologetics, defending their own faith at all costs, inhibiting rational exchanges, and showing a very tenuous relation to the facts. Indeed, the polemics are framed in a closed epistemology of unassailable supernatural 'truths' that does not allow refutation or critique. As such, religious polemics go on to predominate in public discourse and are less easily suppressed by the government than oppositional political debate. The effects of polemic exchanges in this sense are a redrawing of boundaries, discursive over-confidence if not recklessness, decline of dialogue and toleration, and deep rivalry, extending into the social and even demographic sphere. While these developments are a fascinating subject for the study of religious identity formation, the politics of religion, and religious experience itself, the social effects of polemical escalation amount to blighting the relations between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. These effects seep down from the urban areas, where most activists and propagandists operate, to the countryside, where people of different religious persuasion were usually getting along and now have to face its negative aspects. As one Wällo female informant noted:<sup>69</sup>

Now we have those 'well-educated' religious people who think they know all. In the Derg's time there were Socialist university people telling us what to do and how to farm and to forget religion; now we see the fanatics, Wahhabis and Pent'es [adherents of Pentecostal congregations ], who tell us how to conduct our religion. These educated people bring no good, they cause problems like that. ... This is not the right way, and they divert us from the faith of our fathers.

This critique of radicalizing discourse is emerging in circles of ordinary believers. In this respect, it is interesting to note that in recent years some new DVDs and other mediated messages produced by mainstream Muslims in Ethiopia (in Wällo, for example) have appeared that attack the 'reformist/Wahhabist/Salafist' approaches to Islam, or rather defend the local way of life and its religious traditions. Similarly, EOC circles offer critiques on Pentecostal interpretations of Christianity.

The assertions and statements in religious polemics and in the above-cited papers by journalists Johannes and Alem, and pieces by several Muslim writers, are often brash and unreasonable. Sometimes they reflect developments happening on the ground but they are also propagandist and often not based on facts but on gut feelings, suspicion, and hegemonic discourse.

69. Interview, Bistima village, October 2004.

On the side of the 'revivalist/reformist' Muslims, some writers now tend to combat ideas of coexistence and mutual toleration, pleading instead for Islamist supremacy, conversion of 'unbelievers', and ultimately a Muslim state in Ethiopia. On the Pentecostalist side, isolationist and superiority discourses can also be discerned, although more often they are directed inwardly, and in rivalry mainly with the Orthodox Church. While most of the Muslim and Christian publications and media products thus still speak to their own constituencies and exhort believers to be more strict and devout in obedience to the rules of the faith, their effects are nevertheless noticeable in relations outside their religious community. Religious thinking is becoming a more and more dominant frame of reference in which even political decisions and policies are judged. In recent polemics it can further be noted that a purposely confrontational style is developed, seemingly meant to delegitimize the faith of the other.

In view of the increasingly contested but so far functional secular state order in Ethiopia – without a state religion, recognizing religious pluralism, avoiding the defence of political decisions with reference to God or other supernatural forces, and constitutionally recognizing religious courts in many domains of personal life – the impact of religious discourse and frames of reference in the public domain is experienced as a growing problem.<sup>70</sup> In addition, there is the continuing pressure of outside forces – from neighbouring countries, the Muslim Middle East and wider, globally active groups, exerting major financial and ideological influence on the local scene, which can turn into a major political challenge.<sup>71</sup> Thus, as emphatic missionizing efforts and the imposition of religion on others continue to generate controversy and communal tensions, the secular state may need to reassert itself and try to contain its own erosion by encroaching religious discourse via new political measures and educational and social policies on a more structural level. So far, Ethiopia seems to be able to monitor religious threats in the public sphere (including terrorism) better than most other African countries, for example Kenya and Tanzania: here, as Chesworth has described,<sup>72</sup> there were events like the *mihadhara*, public polemical debates between spokesmen of the major faiths, with a disturbing effect on the public order. In

70. Also within the ruling party debate has emerged on the issue; see EPRDF's magazine *Addis Ra'iy* 2, 4 (February 2009), pp. 7–9.

71. See Éloi Ficquet, 'Entrelacs de l'Islam et du Christianisme en Éthiopie', *Cooperazione, Sviluppo e Rapporti con l'Islam nel Corno d'Africa* (Istituto per l'Oriente, Roma, 2004), p. 87; David Shinn, 'Islam and conflict in the Horn of Africa' (Lecture at the American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon, 20 December 2004); Erlich, *The Cross and the Crescent and Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia*.

72. Chesworth, 'Fundamentalism and outreach strategies in East Africa', pp. 168–9.



Ethiopia there are regular state clampdowns on the most eye-catching polemical products (in December 2009, for example), and believers are warned to calm down. In 2010, editors of a Muslim news magazine were imprisoned on rather unconvincing charges, while several people alleged to have 'insulted' Islam were also arrested, though without serious evidence.<sup>73</sup> Experience has shown, however, that such state efforts come and go. In the absence of state reassertion over expansive religious claims, one might expect new phases of civil unrest and conflict in the country that would make the 'ethnic' clashes of the past seem pale in comparison.

### *The precarious balance*

In Ethiopia, ongoing religious polemics will further define the new arenas of communal relations and rivalries in conditions of political closure. Religion is actively and assertively constructed by communal leaders and religious entrepreneurs as the normative, dominant identity of citizens. This connects to its unmistakable social role as a source of community feeling and spiritual consolation, as well as a legitimate alternative focus of collective identification. But the construction of identity has taken the form of competition for 'truth' and religious predominance in the public sphere, with resulting claims on national Ethiopian identity. This antagonistic religious discourse is redefining public space in Ethiopia, and tends to fill up the space vacated by politics with the decline of democratic debate and freedom. There is a precarious balance between the faiths and between faith communities and the state. Ethiopia's political system has gone through major upheavals in the past decade, such as the controversial 2005 elections, street killings, rural repression, human rights problems, and a recent spate of restrictive laws concerning the press, federal powers law, NGOs, and terrorism. Against the background of such political and economic insecurity, growing inequality, and the democratic deficit, the polemic appeal to religion as the dominant element of personal and communal identity will only grow and continue to pose major challenges to the political order.

73. See for example, 'Ethiopia imprisons Christians accused of defacing Quran', <<http://theundergroundsite.com/index.php/2010/11/ethiopia-imprisons-christian-accused-of-defacing-quran-14677>> (12 January 2011).